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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000103

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SUBJECT: VATICAN APPOINTS IRAQ, CHINA EXPERT TO KEY SLOT

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CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Pol/Econ Chief, Vatican, State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Pope Benedict has named Archbishop Fernando Filoni the Holy See's "Sostituto" or "Substitute", the number three position at the Vatican. Filoni will have regular access to the pope and will communicate closely with many of the Roman Curia offices. Filoni has extensive diplomatic experience, with expertise in Chinese and Iraqi affairs. He was a vocal critic of U.S.-led operations in Iraq. Although Filoni is not likely to take public stances on foreign policy in his new position, he will serve as an important sounding board within the Secretariat of State on these issues. End Summary.

Filoni New Substitute

¶2. (U) Pope Benedict XVI has appointed Archbishop Fernando Filoni as "Sostituto" or "Substitute", arguably the third most important position at the Vatican. The Sostituto acts as chief of staff in the Secretariat of State, the central office of the Roman Curia (the Holy See's bureaucracy). The Substitute's desk is the clearing house for a vast number of incoming issues that are primarily internal Church matters, but inevitably impact nearly every aspect of the Vatican's interaction with the world. He is the conduit to the pope and has regular access to him. He also coordinates communications from the pope to Curia offices. Filoni takes over for Archbishop Leonardo Sandri, who will take over the Vatican department dealing with Eastern-rite Catholics on July 1.

Biographical Information

¶3. (U) Fernando Filoni was born on April 15, 1946, in Manduria, southern Italy, and ordained a priest in 1970. After entering the Holy See's diplomatic service in 1981, he worked in Brazil, at the Vatican (1985-89), and in Sri Lanka, Iran, and the Philippines. From 1992 until 2001, he was officially assigned to the apostolic nunciature in the Philippines as a "cultural attachi" but was based in Hong Kong where, as he told reporters in 2001, he was on "a study mission." During that period, Filoni became an expert on Chinese affairs and was Pope John Paul II's point man as the pontiff reached out to all Chinese bishops as he sought to unify the Catholic Church on the mainland.

¶4. (U) In January 2001, Pope John Paul II appointed Filoni as nuncio to Iraq and Jordan, and ordained him as archbishop on March 19, 2001. As nuncio, Archbishop Filoni was the only Western diplomat in Baghdad throughout the war. Later, as attacks were launched against Christian Churches in Baghdad and Kirkuk, he came close to being killed in Baghdad on February 1, 2006, when a car bomb exploded next to the nunciature. Filoni was a vocal critic of U.S.-led operations in Iraq and accused U.S. representatives in Baghdad of having lost control of the country. At one point, he said that "In Washington they still don't understand that they will never be loved, and that the people of Iraq will never tolerate the occupation." However, Filoni was also quick to point out that a withdrawal of coalition troops would leave a security vacuum in Iraq that would destroy the country. Archbishop Filoni was named by Pope Benedict as nuncio to the Philippines on February 25, 2006.

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Comment

¶5. (C) It is no coincidence that Filoni is an expert in both Chinese and Iraqi Church affairs, areas where the Holy See is placing great emphasis. [Septel will discuss the recently-released papal letter to Chinese Catholics.] One can also see echoes of Pope Benedict's criticism (as Cardinal Ratzinger) of U.S. intervention in Iraq with this appointment. Contacts have insisted to us, however, that Filoni has an open mind on U.S. foreign policy; he simply sees the U.S. intervention in Iraq as a "tragic mistake."

¶6. (C) While the Substitute does not often deal publicly with foreign policy, he can be a sounding board within the Secretariat of State on these issues. A high-ranking

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Secretariat official who will serve under Filoni told us he

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expected that the archbishop would take a very active role in internal discussions developing policy - especially on Iraq and China. Filoni's appointment increases the Italian representation among the top five officials at the Holy See Secretariat of State. The departure of the Argentine Sandri

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leaves FM-equivalent Frenchman Dominique Mamberti as the lone

non-Italian in the group.
ROONEY